



Homeworking and hybrid working safely

Working from home is one clear way of keeping staff safe from the virus and any new variants that emerge.

UNISON believes that homeworking and hybrid working should be options for flexible working, in particular to better manage work/life balance.

Hybrid working is a combination of homeworking and attendance at the normal workplace. It may also be called remote working, agile working, smart working, mobile working or teleworking.

But many homeworkers have struggled with their working environment, limited equipment and IT, inadequate workstations, back and neck pain, fatigue, stress and burnout resulting in poor physical health and deteriorating mental health.

Some workers have found that it has made them become invisible within the workforce, unable to progress in their career, unable to access training, reducing their social connections, leaving them feeling isolated, unable to 'disconnect' from their work and creating health and safety risks for them.

Employers may have an expectation for staff to work excessively long hours when working from home. For some people, it may feel that there is no separation between their work and personal lives.

For flexible working to be a positive experience for both employers and staff, UNISON believes it must be truly flexible and truly a choice, and not just limited to homeworking or hybrid working.

How are job roles selected as suitable for homeworking?

As well as the needs of the job role, your employer should ideally consider your individual needs. Enforcing homeworking for all could potentially disadvantage some workers who struggle with the arrangement.

Everybody's home circumstances will vary considerably.

For example, some people may lack space and privacy; others may have a poor internet or mobile phone signal; there may be an increased risk of domestic abuse with less time apart from an

abuser; **disabled workers** may be lacking reasonable adjustments that have been provided in the workplace.

On the other hand, for some disabled workers homeworking could provide a reasonable adjustment in itself, under the Equality Act 2010¹. It may allow some to better manage their impairments without the rigidity of the work environment.

Working safely

Employers continue to be responsible for the **health and safety** of their workers whilst they are working from home.

A starting point would be to check that the **Health and Safety Executive (HSE) guidance** for employers on health and safety for homeworkers is being followed.

It is important that you should raise any health and safety concerns with your line manager as soon as possible.

You should know how working from home risks are to be assessed.

If you work on a computer or laptop at home your employer should ensure that **a display screen equipment (DSE) assessment** is carried out. This can be done by a self-assessment.

You must be given training and guidance to help you assess your own work environment and identify problems.

If you regularly work on computers, you are also entitled to a **free eyesight test** and additional free glasses for computer work if recommended by your optician.

Your employer should also assess and reduce any risks of **work-related stress** from homeworking. Measures taken to reduce the risk include providing support from managers/supervisors, facilitating regular contact with colleagues, monitoring workloads and having good communication mechanisms in place for homeworkers.

Remember, you have a responsibility to make sure you highlight any concerns you know about when working from home, such as faulty electric plug points.

Under Section 3 (2) of the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act, obligations are placed on homeworkers themselves to ensure that they and other persons, including members of the household (as well as the public) are not endangered by work activities undertaken at home.

Areas to think about

- Is your workplace suitable?
- Do you have the correct equipment to do your job?

- Are there any problems such as overcrowding, noise, poor light, musculoskeletal injuries, stress/mental health problems?
- Do you know how to report any problems and concerns about health and safety?
- Do you have any other particular risks that should be taken into account such as if you are pregnant or you are disabled?
- If you are home-based but go out to visit clients, as a **lone worker**, is there a system set up to register your whereabouts so that your safety can be checked on?
- Do you take proper rest breaks? The Working Time Regulations 1998 require workers to take a 20-minute rest break if working more than six hours per day.
- Do you take regular breaks away from your computer screen? It's important to take breaks to reduce the risk of eye and muscle strains. The Health and Safety Executive advise 5 or 10 mins every hour.
- Do you make sure you switch off at the end of the working day?
- Do you know where to go for mental health support such as the employee assistance programme if your organisation has one, or external organisations such as **Mind**?
- Do you use all your annual leave for rest and relaxation and not work whilst on leave or use it for sickness absence?
- Are you aware of any domestic abuse policy agreed at work? You can get support from external services such as the **National Domestic Abuse Helpline** or **Galop** for LGBT+ people.
- If you are disabled, has your employer provided the same reasonable adjustments when you work from home such as equipment, BSL interpreters for online meetings, software, specialist phone? Do you know about **Access to Work** (there's a **different system in Northern Ireland**)?

How to raise a concern

Remember, if you have concerns about your safety as a home or hybrid worker, please speak to your health and safety rep who you can contact via your **UNISON branch**.

If you feel that you have not been given equal access to homeworking or flexible working, or that your home circumstances or reasonable adjustments if you're disabled are not being fully taken into account by your employer, **speak to your local representative for support or advice**.

¹ In Northern Ireland, this requirement is enshrined in the Disability Discrimination Act 1995.